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ABSTRACT

This brief presents trends in youth attitudes in three areas relevant to welfare reform: family formation and parenting, work and work preparation, and community service. The data in this study come from the 1985-99 Monitoring the Future survey, a nationally representative annual survey of high school seniors that monitors changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Among high school seniors, the general desirability of a good marriage remained strong between 1985 and 1999 whereas the acceptability of cohabitation increased steadily. There was increasing appreciation for the importance of fatherhood and increasing agreement that maternal employment does not hurt preschoolers. Females were less likely than males, and blacks less likely than whites, to believe that maternal employment harms preschoolers. Black students were significantly more likely to: espouse the importance of success in work; acknowledge the centrality of work in their lives; identify good grades as important to school status; accept employment for mothers of young children; and appreciate the importance of fatherhood. The study showed that youth are becoming more community-conscious. Community leadership was more likely to be an important personal goal among black students. More black than white students questioned marriage as a way of

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life, though they were equally likely to value a good marriage and family life. (SM)

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Child TRENDS

Youth Attitudes on Family, Work, and Community Service: Implications for Welfare Reform

Brett V. Brown, Child Trends

Given the assumptions and expectations of the framers of welfare reform, teenage values and attitudes may be particularly important factors affecting its chances for ultimate success.

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Introduction

The authors of the welfare reform law believed that success depends on doing more than reducing the welfare rolls. Many thought that the ultimate success of welfare reform in improving the lives of the poor depends, in part, on the promotion of positive cultural values and attitudes leading to self-sufficiency and away from dependence and poverty.

This perspective is explicitly stated in the law's title, the *Personal Responsibility* and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), and is spelled out in its opening sections, which identify two-parent families, responsible parenting, self-sufficiency, and work as core goals. Nonmarital birth (particularly among teens) is discouraged (Congressional Record 1996); in fact, the law provides funds for abstinence programs that promote the importance of childbearing only within the context of marriage. Values associated with work, self-sufficiency, and parenting are reflected in the law's time limit, work, and paternity identification requirements, with the expectation that these newly required behaviors would foster new values. In addition, many hoped that the reduction in governmental supports would lead to a revival of community involvement and volunteerism among all citizens with respect to the care of those still in need.

Teenagers make many of the important decisions leading to or away from initial welfare dependence: acceptance or rejection of nonmarital pregnancy, childbearing (Plotnick and Butler 1991), and drug use (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000); and level of labor force participation (Brown 1993). Research literature, in fact, has established a relationship between youth values and attitudes and these behaviors. Consequently, given the assumptions and expectations of the framers of welfare reform, teenage values and attitudes may be particularly important factors affecting its chances for ultimate success.

This brief presents trends in youth attitudes in three areas relevant to welfare reform: family formation and parenting, work and preparation for work, and community service.

Annual data are presented for 1985 through 1999, covering the decade preceding welfare reform and the first three years after its passage. A complex set of cultural trends emerge. Whether these trends favor or work against welfare reform's success, they show modest evidence at best of change that might reflect the effects of PRWORA.

Description of the Data

The data presented here come from the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey for the years 1985 through 1999, three years into welfare reform. The MTF is a nationally representative survey of high school seniors designed to monitor changes in their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors over time. Conducted annually since 1975, it is the richest source of regularly collected youth attitudes data available and contains measures on a variety of issues relevant to

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TABLE 1. Youth Attitudes on Family, Work, and Community Service, 1999 (Data on 12th-Grade Students in the United States)

	Total	Sex		Race		Parental Education[a]	
		Male	Female	White	Black	High School or Less	More than High School
The Family: Marriage, Cohabitation, and Parenting							
1. Percentage who report that having a good marriage and family is extremely important	77.7	74.1	82.1	79.0	75.5	78.0	77.5
2. Percentage who report that they are likely to choose to get married in the long run	80.8	78.2	83.7	85.2	71.1	79.8	81.2
3. Percentage who report that they mostly agree/agree that one sees so few good or happy marriages that one questions it as a way of life	26.0	25.8	28.5	25.7	37.7	34.5	25.3
4. Percentage who report that they agree that it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along	36.5	38.9	34.4	35.0	48.1	41.8	31.4
5. Percentage who report that a man and a woman who decide to have and raise a child out of wedlock are either living in a way that could be destructive to society or violating a basic principle of human morality	33.8	37.8	30.0	36.8	27.1	35.0	45.0
6. Percentage who report that they mostly agree/agree that a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work	88.0	87.2	88.0	86.2	83.8	70.9	87.5
7. Percentage who report that they mostly agree/agree that a preschool child is likely to suffer if his mother works	30.0	41.2	19.5	31.8	19.8	33.6	31.0
8. Percentage who report that they agree that being a father and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a man can have	48.7	50.2	47.5	47.2	60.3	58.6	48.6
Work and Preparation for Work							
9. Percentage who report that getting good grades is of great or very great importance	67.1	64.2	69.4	39.2	77.4	50.1	42.9
10. Percentage who report that being successful in their line of work is extremely important	62.8	62.8	64.3	60.3	78.1	63.5	64.8
11. Percentage who report that they mostly agree/agree that they expect that work will be a very central part of their life	62.4	60.0	61.2	57.6	75.2	66.6	63.5
Community Involvement							
12. Percentage who report that being a leader in the community is quite important or extremely important	41.8	44.3	39.3	40.2	50.1	41.1	41.5
13. Percentage who report that they participate in community affairs or volunteer work at least once or twice a month	31.0	29.3	33.8	32.1	30.9	27.3	36.6

Source: Monitoring the Future: 1998-1999, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan.
a. Data on parental education is from 1998.

the purposes of this brief. The total sample size for the items examined varies somewhat from year to year and across items, ranging from about 2,100 to 3,400 students.

For all its advantages, the MTF has some significant limitations. First, because the survey is limited to students, it does not include youth who have dropped out of high school. Second, our population subgroup estimates are limited primarily to what was available in published volumes of the survey[5]—race (black and white) and gender. For the years 1995 through 1998, separate estimates by parental educational attainment level were produced for this brief. Unfortunately, no family structure, income, or welfare use characteristics are available in the MTF.

Results

The Family: Marriage, Cohabitation, and Parenting

For years, the Monitoring the Future survey has asked questions about the desirability of marriage and cohabitation, with and without children. It also asks about the likely effects of maternal employment on the well-being of children, including preschoolers, and the importance of fatherhood as an experience for men (table 1).

Marriage. Attitudes toward marriage among high school seniors have remained remarkably stable overall since 1985 (table 2). During the period from 1985 to 1999, a consistently high proportion—roughly

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TABLE 2. *Percentage of 12th-Grade Students Who Report That Having a Good Marriage and Family Is Extremely Important, 1985–1999*

	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Total	74.3	75.4	74.2	74.9	75.4	77.7	77.8	78.0	78.8	78.5	78.1	77.7	76.7	76.0	77.7
Sex															
Male	68.4	68.3	66.8	68.0	70.4	74.2	70.7	72.4	73.9	70.3	72.9	73.8	72.0	71.8	74.1
Female	80.4	82.1	81.7	82.1	81.0	82.7	83.1	84.1	84.8	85.9	83.7	81.4	80.9	82.0	82.1
Race															
White	75.0	75.7	73.7	75.6	75.2	78.0	78.1	78.7	79.3	78.3	78.1	78.2	76.5	78.6	79.0
Black	73.2	75.6	76.1	74.6	78.2	78.6	78.4	75.4	75.6	72.4	75.8	75.4	76.0	77.4	76.8
Parental Education															
High school or less											78.5	77.3	76.6	78.0	
More than high school											78.0	77.8	76.9	77.5	

Source: Monitoring the Future: 1988–1998, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan.

three-quarters—indicated that having a good marriage and family life was "extremely important" to them. There is virtually no difference by race or parental education level. Rates for females are somewhat higher than for males (83 versus 74 percent in 1999).

When students were asked whether they were likely to choose marriage, they responded in a similar way—with one important exception. Black students were consistently less likely than whites to report that they would eventually choose to marry (71 versus 85 percent in 1999) (table 1). Blacks were also more likely to respond "I have no idea," but were only somewhat more likely to respond that they would choose not to get married,[3] indicating that their answers may have been tempered by the realities of the marriage market they are likely to face as adults (South 1996). This interpretation is reinforced by the pattern of responses to the statement, "One sees so few good or happy marriages that one questions it as a way of life." Responses were also stable over time, but blacks were much more likely than whites to "agree" or "mostly agree" with the statement (38 versus 26 percent in 1999).

Cohabitation. While attitudes toward marriage have been steady since 1985, the perceived desirability of cohabitation prior to marriage has steadily increased. Students were asked to respond to the following statement: "It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along." On a five-point scale of agreement ("disagree," "mostly disagree," "neither," "mostly agree," and "agree"), the percentage who responded that they "agree" with the statement increased from 23 percent in 1985 to 37 percent in 1999 (figure 1). Men and women, blacks and whites, all showed substantial increases.[4] Blacks were more likely to agree than whites (46 versus 35 percent in 1999). Students whose parents had more than a high school diploma were less likely to agree than those whose parents had a high school diploma or less (31 versus 42 percent in 1998) (table 1).

A second question addresses cohabitation in the context of having a child. The proportion of students who actively disapproved of a couple deciding to have and raise a child out of wedlock fluctuated between 41 and 34 percent from 1985 to 1999 (table 3). Whites were consistently more likely than blacks to disapprove (37 versus 27 percent in 1999).

Parenting. Several aspects of parenting are particularly salient to welfare reform. One concerns the potential impact on children of maternal work requirements under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The other is an emphasis on promoting responsible fatherhood. Survey questions directly address both issues.

In 1999, 69 percent of 12th-grade youth "agreed" or "mostly agreed" with the statement that a working mother could establish just as warm and secure relationship with her children as a mother who did not work (table 1)[5]—a modest increase from 62 percent in 1985. When asked specifically about the effects of maternal employment on preschoolers (a particular concern given TANF work requirements), the percentage reporting that the child was likely to suffer declined substantially from 49 percent in 1985 to 30 percent in

During the period from 1985 to 1999, a consistently high proportion of high school seniors—roughly three-quarters—indicated that having a good marriage and family life was "extremely important" to them.

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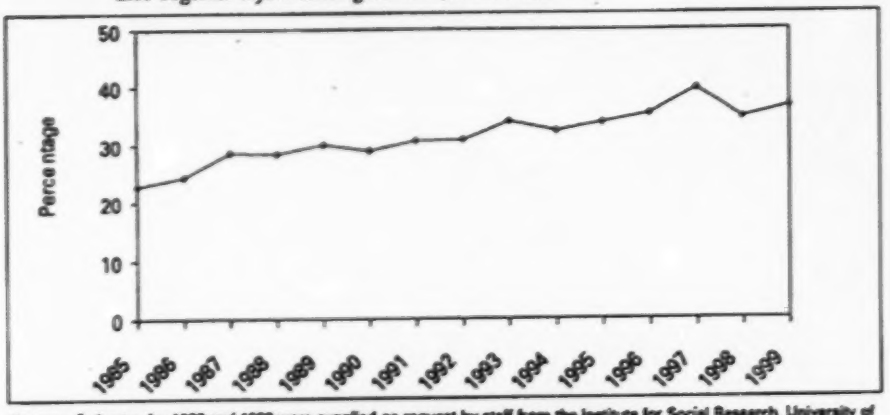
TABLE 3. Percentage of 12th-Grade Students Who Report That a Man and Woman Who Decide to Raise a Child Out of Wedlock Are Either Living in a Way That Could Be Destructive to Society or Violating a Basic Principle of Human Morality, 1985–1999

	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Total	41.2	40.0	35.8	40.2	37.6	38.1	34.0	37.3	33.7	34.0	35.3	34.7	34.4	36.5	33.8
Sex															
Male	41.6	39.7	35.9	40.2	40.3	38.9	35.7	38.5	33.6	35.9	37.2	38.6	36.5	38.6	37.9
Female	41.1	40.7	35.6	40.6	35.4	37.3	32.2	36.6	33.8	33.6	34.2	31.9	32.7	35.4	30.0
Race															
White	43.4	42.1	38.0	42.6	38.5	40.9	36.5	39.8	36.0	37.6	38.2	37.6	37.3	39.1	36.6
Black	30.9	29.5	29.7	32.7	32.6	34.0	29.4	28.9	27.1	24.9	22.6	23.3	25.8	29.1	27.1
Parental Education															
High school or less											22.3	20.0	23.9	26.9	
More than high school											37.1	36.6	30.3	45.0	

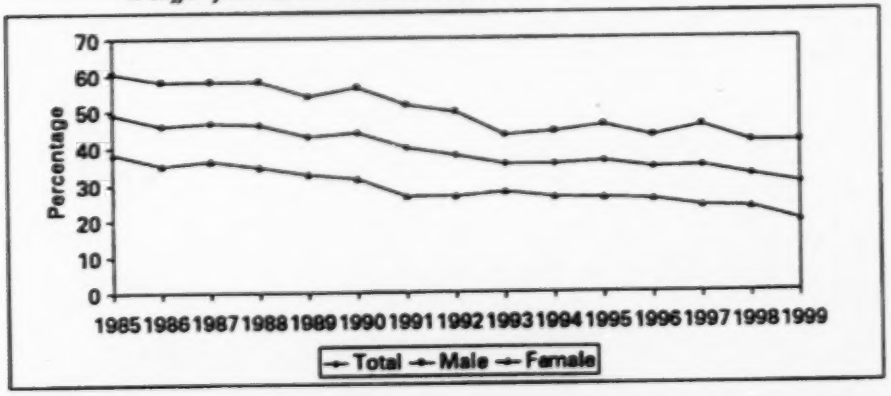
Source: Monitoring the Future: 1998–1999, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan.

FIGURE 1. Twelfth-Grade Students Who Agree That It Is Usually a Good Idea for a Couple to Live Together before Getting Married, 1985–1999



Sources: Estimates for 1998 and 1999 were supplied on request by staff from the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. All other estimates taken from Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley (various years).

FIGURE 2. Twelfth-Grade Students Who Agree to Some Extent That a Preschool Child Is Likely to Suffer If the Mother Works, 1985–1999



Sources: Estimates for 1998 and 1999 were supplied on request by staff from the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. All other estimates taken from Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley (various years).

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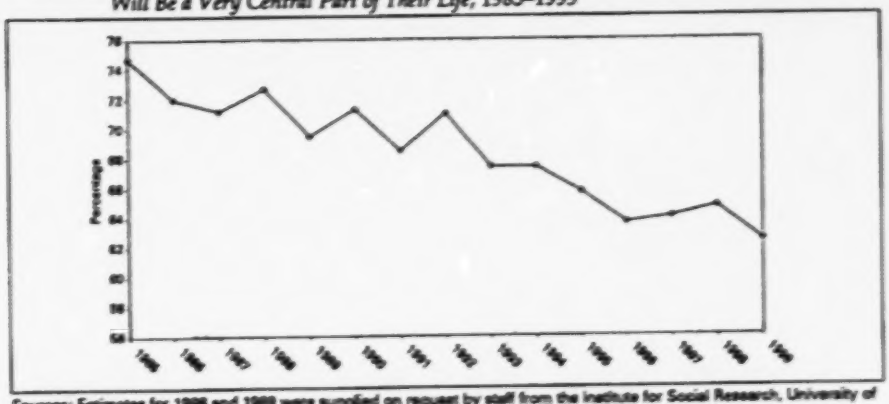
FIGURE 3. Twelfth-Grade Students Who Agree or Mostly Agree That They Expect That Work Will Be a Very Central Part of Their Life, 1985–1999



Sources: Estimates for 1998 and 1999 were supplied on request by staff from the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. All other estimates taken from Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley (various years).

1999 (figure 2). Again, the bulk of this decline preceded PRWORA. Females were far less likely than males to believe the child would be harmed (20 versus 41 percent in 1999), and blacks were less likely than whites to believe that it was a problem (20 versus 32 percent in 1999) (table 1). Percentages declined for all groups over the time period. Interestingly, differences by parental education level were small in 1999, with 31 percent of those whose parents had more than a high school diploma reporting the child was likely to suffer versus 34 percent of all others.

Turning from mothers to fathers, there has been steady growth in the proportion of youth who agree that being a father and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a man can have—from 39 percent in 1985 to 49 percent in 1999[6] and including increases from 45 to 49 percent between 1995 and 1999. Black youth were more likely than whites to agree (60 versus 47 percent in 1999) (table 1).

Work and Preparation for Work

The MTF survey asks a number of questions that allow us to gauge whether youth attitudes are reflecting the increased emphasis on work and preparation for work that are central to welfare reform.

The first question asks about the relationship of good grades and status in school. The proportion of students reporting that good grades were of "great" or "very great" importance for achieving high status remained fairly constant from 1985 to 1999—between 44 and 49 percent.[6] Importantly, black youth were nearly twice as likely as white youth to report the importance of this relationship—77 versus 39 percent in 1999 (table 1).

Relevant attitude questions directly related to work include the importance of being successful and the expected centrality of work in students' lives. The results indicate that most youth appreciate the importance and value of hard work in their lives and are determined to be successful at it. In fact, success at work has consistently been an important goal for the majority of 12th graders. From 1985 to 1999, between 60 and 66 percent reported that work success was "extremely important" to them.[7] A high proportion also believe that work will be a very central part of their lives. In 1985, 75 percent of youth "agreed" or "mostly agreed" that work would be very central. That percentage decreased over time to 62 percent in 1999, having changed little during the period between 1996 and 1999 (figure 3).

Black high school seniors were consistently more likely than whites to report that being successful at work was extremely important to them (76 versus 60 percent in 1999) and to expect that work would be a very central part of their lives (75 versus 58 percent in 1999) (table 1). Differences by gender and parental education level for both measures were modest or nonexis-

There has been steady growth in the proportion of youth who agree that being a father and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a man can have.

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TABLE 4. Percentage of 12th-Grade Students Who Report That Being a Leader in the Community Is Either Quite Important or Extremely Important, 1985–1999

	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Total	26.1	27.8	28.4	32.0	33.5	36.6	34.0	37.5	38.6	38.4	38.9	40.4	41.5	41.7	41.6
Sex															
Male	27.4	32.4	29.4	35.1	36.3	37.3	36.4	39.7	42.1	39.8	39.4	42.4	43.5	42.5	44.3
Female	24.4	23.8	24.1	28.1	31.6	33.1	32.3	35.8	35.0	37.5	38.2	38.5	39.1	43.0	39.3
Race															
White	24.3	28.6	25.0	31.1	31.8	33.6	31.8	35.8	36.5	35.8	34.2	37.3	38.0	38.7	40.2
Black	31.0	27.2	34.6	38.9	42.2	48.6	46.4	51.3	44.9	52.9	61.1	54.8	52.4	53.4	50.1
Parental Education															
High school or less											33.7	33.4	37.1	41.1	
More than high school											38.2	42.3	42.8	41.5	

Source: Monitoring the Future: 1998–1999, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan.

tent, differing by only a few percentage points in most years.[8]

Community Involvement

Data from the MTF survey indicate that youth are increasingly attaching great importance to community involvement and volunteer work. From 1985 to 1999, the proportion of high school seniors for whom being a leader in the community was "quite" or "extremely" important rose steadily from 26 to 42 percent (table 4).[9] Community leadership is particularly important to black youth, with half reporting that it was quite or extremely important in 1999, compared with 40 percent of whites (table 1). The overall trend is also evident in reports of actual volunteering on the part of youth, where the proportion of seniors reporting that they volunteered at least once or twice per month rose from 23 to 33 percent between 1985 and 1998 before dropping slightly to 31 percent in 1999 (data not shown). For both questions, levels were fairly constant for the three years after PRWORA was enacted.

The results indicate that most youth appreciate the importance and value of hard work in their lives and are determined to be successful at it.

Discussion

Taken together, what do these trends and subgroup differences tell us about the likely course of welfare reform and the effects that PRWORA may have already had on youth attitudes? Evidence for shifts in attitudes related to welfare reform were not strong. Where trends were observed between 1996 and 1999, they appeared to be part of longer-term trends and thus were not likely to be directly attributable to the effects of PRWORA.

The most important long-term trends in youth attitudes relate to marriage and parenting. While the general desirability of a good marriage and family life remained strong over the time period in question, the acceptability of cohabitation—including cohabitation involving a child—increased steadily and substantially. Additionally, because cohabitation is a less stable family form than marriage and results in higher divorce rates among cohabitors who do eventually marry (Bumpass and Sweet 1989), its increasing acceptance seems likely to result in more families needing assistance, all other things being equal.

Long-term trends related to parenting, on the other hand, may bode well for welfare reform. The increasing appreciation for the importance of fatherhood as an experience may well translate into more fathers who want, or are required, to maintain a personal and financial relationship with their children, even if they are not living with them. Increasing agreement that maternal employment does not hurt preschoolers has important implications as well. It may result in a lower proportion of actual and potential welfare recipients who are conflicted about going to work while their children are very young. The fact that females were less likely than males, and blacks less likely than whites, to believe that maternal employment is detrimental to the well-being of preschoolers indicates that this may be the case. However, since it was not possible to look separately at the attitudes of young women who are at the greatest risk of needing assistance, we cannot be sure on this point.

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The fact that youth have become more community-conscious is also a positive sign for the future of welfare reform. As time limits and sanctions put greater numbers of women and children out of the TANF support system, those families will need to rely more heavily on formal and informal sources of support from the community. Whether the growing desire for community involvement and leadership will translate into the substantial availability of support needed by such families is an open question, but the possibility for increases in nongovernmental resources available through the community clearly exists.

Finally, it is important to note that many of the attitudes and values that welfare reform seeks to encourage in our society already run particularly strong in the black community. Black students were substantially more likely than whites to espouse the importance of success in work, to acknowledge the centrality of work in their lives, and to identify good grades as important to status in school. They were also more accepting of employment for mothers of young children and more appreciative of fatherhood as a key experience. Community leadership was more likely to be an important personal goal among black students. That more black than white youth questioned marriage as a way of life, and fewer thought they would choose marriage, is a constraining factor. However, the fact that black students were just as likely to value a good marriage and family life as whites indicates that the differences in attitudes toward marriage may be driven largely by the realities of the marriage market faced by black youth. Overall, to the extent that these attitudes do, in fact, affect behaviors leading to or away from welfare receipt, the black community has rich attitudinal resources to draw upon as TANF proceeds into the 21st century.

Endnotes

1. Because of this, significance tests could not be performed. Differences of only a few percentage points should be interpreted with great caution.

2. Data not shown.

3. Data prior to 1999 not shown by gender or race, but are available from the author.

4. Possible responses included "disagree," "mostly disagree," "neither," "mostly agree," and "agree."

5. Data for 1999 in table 1. Data for previous years not shown, but are available from the author.

6. Possible responses included "very great," "great," "moderate," and "little importance."

7. Possible responses included "extremely," "quite," "somewhat," and "not important."

8. See note 5.

9. Possible responses included "not," "somewhat," "quite," and "extremely important."

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